

Don't gut social services to satisfy McCleary ruling

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The News Tribune
August 17, 2014

All children in Washington should have the opportunity to succeed in well-funded, high quality schools. However, for many families without access to a home, food or health care, this opportunity diminishes substantially.

The Washington Supreme Court's McCleary decision seeks to partially solve this situation by forcing the Legislature to more adequately fund education. We at the Children's Alliance and Washington Low Income Housing Alliance support the decision. Yet the debate continues on how best to carry it out.

Some suggest we divert funds from social services, and to that we absolutely disagree. Hungry, sick, poorly housed children face greater barriers to success in school. Both are important: good schools and the services and supports that help kids take advantage of what school has to offer. Yet programs like these have been subject to five years of cuts totaling \$10 billion in state funds – inflicting real damage on Washington's future.

This is important to think about as the U.S. passes a demographic milestone. Shortly, the majority of K-12 students nationwide will be children of color. Because of deeply entrenched patterns of neglect, bias and disinvestment in low-income areas, urban and rural, and in communities of color, too many children face a steep path toward success.

Our kids' challenges, in and out of the classroom, prompted us to file our joint amicus curiae brief along with Columbia Legal Services, to the state supreme court last week. The brief requests that the state refrain from funding K-12 education in a way that jeopardizes housing and other basic services to children and families.

Make no mistake: K-12 education must be fully funded. At issue is not our kids' undisputed right to educational opportunity. At issue is one potential zero-sum approach to the court's ruling: to freeze funding or make cuts to social programs in order to increase education spending.

You can't cut support for other necessities like housing and food and expect to uphold our children's right to a basic education. That approach would be counterproductive to the outcomes the court is seeking.

If funded at the expense of their shelter, food, health care or other basic needs, our children's education suffers. For example, studies show that children placed in the foster care system often perform below average academically. Researchers have identified frequent transfers between

new homes as an academic disadvantage. A well-supported foster care system lessens student mobility.

Poor health and poor grades go hand in hand. Planning and intervention programs to boost child health, therefore, also help boost academic success.

More than 30,000 homeless children attended Washington schools last year. Studies show they overall fall behind their housed peers in math, reading and science, and they are far less likely to graduate on time. Our state's babies, toddlers and preschoolers need high-quality care and learning opportunities. Yet the zero-sum approach could wipe out all state money for pre-K and all state money for higher education – and still come up short in satisfying McCleary's funding requirement.

Facing choices like this, it's apparent that raising revenue is imperative.

Every child deserves an opportunity to learn. When our state joined the union, its founders recognized this as a basic truth. They were so certain of this that it's enshrined in our state constitution in Article IX, Section I. And in order to learn, children also need to have a safe, affordable home; healthy food to eat; economic stability; quality early care; and access to health care that keeps them in school, body and mind.

From the state constitution's framers to our state's supreme court, lawmakers of the past have pointed the way toward our obligation to our kids. We need lawmakers of the present to follow along.

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Read more here: <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2014/08/17/3332975/dont-gut-social-services-to-satisfy.html?sp=/99/447/#storylink=cpy>